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Collaborative governance of a peri-urban enclave: how a farm became nature and citizen oriented

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Abstract – This paper is about peri-urban farmers who turned the threat of the city into an opportunity, by collaborating with a wide range of stakeholders, and by developing a strategy aimed at delivering ecosystem services. This way, they made their farm too important to be converted into a residential area or urban park. Although citizen involvement with the farm has grown, involvement of governmental actors has dwindled as soon as collaborative action was achieved. This paper makes a plea for learning in addition to action.

Keywords – collaborative governance, peri-urban farming, ecosystem services, farming for nature

INTRODUCTION

Farms in peri-urban areas usually cannot ignore the influence of the city, which may include high land prices, urbanisation pressure, and recreational activities. One of the main resources of farmers in peri-urban areas is their land, which holds the potential for the delivery of a range of ecosystem services to the nearby city dwellers. Turning these ecosystem services into a business model is not easy, because of the public goods characteristics of most of them. For that reason, mechanisms for payment need to be developed through collaborative governance.

Collaborative governance can be understood as the processes and structures of public policy decision making and management that engage people constructively across the boundaries of public agencies, levels of government, and/ or the public, private and civic spheres in order to carry out a public purpose that could not otherwise be accomplished (Emerson et al., 2012). Emerson et al. developed a framework for analysing processes of collaborative governance. Within a collaborative governance regime (CGR), they distinguish dynamics and actions (outputs). These actions may impact the context which the collaborative governance tries to influence, but also the collaborative governance regime itself, leading to adaptation. Collaboration evolves as a result of one or more drivers, such as initiating leadership. The core of collaborative governance, in their view, is the interplay of principled engagement, shared motivation, and capacity for joint action, which together determine the quality and extent of the collaboration dynamics leading to action.

I follow this framework developed by Emerson et al. (2012) in the analysis of a case study of collaborative governance of a peri-urban enclave aimed at enhancing ecosystem services. As action researcher, I have been deeply involved in the case. Not only did I supervise the trans-disciplinary program for monitoring and evaluation (Opdam et al., 2015), I was also involved in the collaborative governance process

(Buizer et al., forthcoming). As a result, I can build on a rich archive of data, including results of monitoring, minutes of meetings, emails, and my own observations.

CASE STUDY: FARMING FOR NATURE IN BIESLAND

Context

The Biesland Polder, a remnant of the open moist grassland landscape once common in large parts of the Western Netherlands, by now is surrounded by residential areas, urban parks and greenhouse areas belonging to the cities and towns of The Hague, Delft, Pijnacker and Delfgauw. Only one full-time dairy farmer has remained. Around 2000, local and regional governments developed plans for housing and extending the urban parks in Biesland.

Drivers

Together with a nature volunteer, the farmer was already developing ideas about making the farm more relevant to the city by enhancing its natural values, when he heard about Farming for Nature (Buizer, 2008, pp. 63-112). Farming for Nature (FfN) by then was no more than a vision for integrating farming and nature, developed by researchers. The researchers were looking for farms to try out their ideas. When the Biesland farmer approached them, they arranged research funding for initiating a collaborative effort. This way, the researchers were given the (financial) possibility to show leadership in addition to the formal leading role of the Province and the informal leadership of the farmer.

Collaboration dynamics

The researchers organised a range of meetings with the farmers, officials of local and regional governments, nature volunteers and members of a new citizen group. Principled engagement resulted from the positive effects expected from FfN on landscape amenity, biodiversity and water quality (ecosystem services). Even though their stakes in ecosystem services did not always overlap, the various stakeholders acknowledged that they needed to collaborate to implement FfN. During the phases preceding action (2002-2008), collaboration was intense and took place at various levels, sites and moments (Westerink et al., 2013). Shared motivation grew in this process, especially through joint struggles and joint accomplishments, for instance in the cumbersome EU state aid notification process and in establishing financial commitment of the participating governments (Buizer et al., forthcoming). As a result of this principled engagement and shared motivation, the collaborating actors chose to develop tailor-made governance arrangements. To pay the farmers for the ecosystem services delivered, a local payment scheme was set up, that differs substantially from the national

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agri-environmental scheme (Westerink et al., 2014). This scheme, combined with the lessons learnt in the monitoring and evaluation, and the leadership shown, embodied the capacity for joint action.

Collaborative actions

Based on a plan developed together with their collaboration partners, and supported by the payment scheme, the farmers transformed their farm, both in the sense of landscape layout and farm management practices. The transformed landscape and the new farming practices are aimed at delivering a wide range of ecosystem services: more biodiversity in the fields as well as the landscape elements, a better water quality in the ditches, more room for storm water storage, and a more attractive landscape for recreation. To ensure extensification, no manure is imported to the farm, and purchase of feed is allowed only in exchange for export of manure. In addition, water levels were raised in spring, and shallow shores were laid out along many of the ditches.

Impacts and adaptation

Involvement of citizens with the farm has increased greatly since the farmer started with FfN. The plans for housing were abolished and no grassland was transformed into park. The farm had made itself very important to the city.

However, the CGR changed as soon as the joint action was taken. The emphasis moved from deliberation to learning, but there was less government involvement in the monitoring and evaluation network than in the deliberations aimed at joint action. As a result of the experiences of putting FfN into practice, one major adaptation was done to the scheme and the farming system, related to the no-input rule. Around that adaptation, there was a little peak in government involvement, which soon subsided again. Research funding stopped after five years, putting an end to the input of the researchers in collaboration as well as monitoring and evaluation. Most of the action is now with the farmers, still farming according to FfN, supported by the local payment scheme. In addition, they have developed new collaborations, in order to remain relevant to the city.

DISCUSSION

Emerson et al. (2012) make ten propositions about the functioning of collaborative governance regimes, of which I highlight two:

- Collaborative actions are more likely to be implemented if a shared theory of action is identified explicitly among the collaboration partners and the collaborative dynamics function to generate the needed capacity for joint action (pr. 8).
- CGRs will be more sustainable over time when they adapt to the nature and level of impacts resulting from their joint actions (pr. 10).

In the case of FfN in Biesland, the collaborative dynamics have clearly generated the needed capacity for joint action. The ideas of FfN formed a shared theory of action that supported the collaborating partners in moving from individual problems to joint solutions. In other words, FfN supplied a common language or 'boundary concept' that fostered collaborative governance (Opdam et al., 2015).

The sustainability of the CGR, however, may be a matter of concern. Without frequent meetings and deliberations, engagement and shared motivation may dwindle. Without learning process, the need for new adaptations may go unnoticed. Focussing on action only thus may diminish the capacity to adapt. Partners should therefore not be satisfied with achieving collaborative actions, but are recommended to actively take part in learning from the impact of those actions.

The farmers, however, understood that they needed to collaborate and adapt in order to sustain their farm. They did so when they adopted FfN and they continued to do so.

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